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# RELIGION AND ART:

## SOME MAIN PROBLEMS OF RECENT ARCHEOLOGY

BY VERNON LEE

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“*Non murato, ma veramente nato*,” “not built but in very truth born,” is the praise applied by one of the earliest of professional art critics to the Farnesina Palace. These words of Vasari’s sum up delightfully one of the chief, and I believe, of the most essential, impressions produced in our mind by every excellent work of art: that of its being of a whole so satisfying that we experience some difficulty in imagining it in any previous and incomplete stage of its existence. This, which one might term the retrospective immortality of the work of art, has gradually yielded to our increasing scientific instincts. For, opposed in this to æsthetic contemplation, scientific curiosity is not satisfied with saying to the passing show “Stay, thou are beautiful”; but must needs ask how it came to be just what it is. The attempt to answer this question was made until recently by the very unscientific group of studies and speculations called *art-criticism*, or, in the more pompous phraseology of Hegel and Taine, *Philosophy of Art*. How has a work of art come to be just what it is and not what some other work of art happens to be? What is its origin? What the genealogy, the pre-natal history, the embryology of this wonderful thing which, at first-sight, seems sprung like Pallas Athene, fully equipped and irresistible, from the creative will of a kind of God?

The divinity playing the part of Zeus in this genetic, this seemingly partheno-genetic, mystery, is of course first looked for in the person of the Artist. Since it is from the artist’s hands we receive each new work of art; and since also the only process concerned in a work of art’s origin,

which is visible to our everyday and unscientific observation, is the material, mechanical process of changing so much clay or stone into a statue or an edifice; so much pigment and prepared surface into a painting; since what is offered to our senses is a poet covering paper with the ink spots registering a poem, a musician drawing sounds out of an instrument or directing others so to draw them.

Thus when the old-fashioned school of so-called artistic criticism<sup>1</sup> is asked to account for the characteristics of Michelangelo's frescoes and statues, or of Beethoven's quartets and symphonies, it answers with an account of Michelangelo's or Beethoven's private life and character, of which those masterpieces are supposed, indeed taken for granted, to be the direct outcome and expression. But curiosity respecting the work of art's *why-and-wherefore* does not rest here. Art-philosophers, for so they are apt to call themselves, disciples, even when unaware of being so, of Hegel and of Taine, look further into the matter and discover something of which the artist himself seems the product, even as the work of art had seemed solely his, namely, his *historical environment*. According to them, it is not the mere man Michelangelo, with his patriotic sufferings and domestic crossness, his mystic enthusiasms and nervous panics, who we find expressed in the *Dawn* and the *Dusk*, the *Prophets* and *Sybils*: it is the spiritually bankrupt Renaissance, the humiliated Italy, the despairing but regenerated Christianity of the sixteenth century. It is, similarly, the early nineteenth century, the ardent but melancholy romanticism following on the Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, which is *expressing itself* (as the phrase goes) through the genius of Beethoven. Has not even the great innovating Danish archeologist, Julius Lange, informed us that the stereotyped smile, or as some would say, the smirk, of Æginetan and other immediately pre-Phidian statues is the expression of the cheerful heroism of the Greece which defeated Darius and Xerxes?<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ste. Beuve is the type of this school of "critics" which originated in connection with literature. The examples of Michelangelo and Beethoven are taken from the two studies by M. Romain Rolland, the incomparable literary artist who has given us *Jean Christophe*.

<sup>2</sup> Hegel, *Æsthetik*, circa 1830; Taine, *Philosophie de l'Art*, 5 vols., 1865-6. Julius Lange was translated from the Danish into German about 1900. A recent popularization of this kind of view, indeed its *reductio ad absurdum*, is the suggestive and often delightfully appreciative *Works of Man*, by March-Phillips, 1911.

This onward step in the enquiry, "how a work of art has come to be just what it is," was hastened by two accidental circumstances which have tended to shelve the old "Philosophy of Art" and to substitute for it two separate branches of study and speculation, namely artistic archeology and what is usually called "connoisseurship."

The first accident in question is that Antiquity has left us comparatively few original works of sculpture, none at all of painting on a large scale, and very few copies documentarily certified as such; for are there not archeologists who refuse to give the Hermes to Praxiteles, and is not the authorship of the various Parthenon sculptures a subject of controversy? And the corresponding accident is that the Middle Ages and Renaissance carried on art in co-operative workshops, practicing a kind of authorized forgery, and were utterly unbusinesslike both in signing works of art and in inventorying them. For such uncertainty in what is technically called *attribution* prevented the explanation of a work of art's characteristics by the personality of a craftsman who might prove never to have gone near it; while it also emphasized the fact that works of art by different individuals may possess all their main features in common. This difficulty, often this utter impossibility, of ascertaining the true authorship of any work, has resulted in a classification no longer by individual artists, but by schools.

We have witnessed the pasting-over of museum-labels once bearing the single word "Giorgione" or "Leonardo" with others adding a humble "school of —." And it is sometimes possible to read the half effaced word "Phidias" or "Polyclete" on statues or casts more recently designated as "Fifth Century Greek." This change of labels, of "attributions," has meant a tendency to refer the "style," the dominant characteristics, of a work of art no longer to the personality of the artist, but, as had already been done by Taine with such wealth of historical detail and such lack of psychological *why* and *wherefore*, to the characteristics (often tautologically derived from the work of art itself) of the men who had surrounded or begotten that artist, to his "Historical Environment," his "Civilization," his "Race."

Race! That great X which philology and anthropology are now reducing to little more than a phantom born of

the imposition of an invader's language and the acceptance of a subjugated civilization by men of mixed ancestry,—“Race” has of course done duty to explain everything because it flattered the prejudices and hostilities of that “Nationalism” which has worked such abominable havoc (Pan-germanism, Pan-slavism, British Imperialism, Italian Irredentism, and “*Défense des l'Esprit Français*”) ever since the reaction against Napoleon's dream of universal monarchy and against the cosmopolitanism which the mediæval church had taken over from a greater world empire than his. But in proportion as investigation has proved that “Race,” when not the mask for such political intolerance, is in itself the least fathomed of mysteries, the easy and dogmatic explanation of how a work of art has come to be just what it is, this explanation by “Race” has been left to the same naïve and popular critics who had formerly explained by Michelangelo's life the characteristics of his works, even of works which had been forged long after Michelangelo's life was ended.

The progress of scientific investigation has done much more than this. It has led to the recognition and the methodical study of another, a hitherto unrecognized factor of artistic style. And it has, at the same time, transformed into something scientifically ascertainable the overestimated but insufficiently defined factor of “Historical Environment.”

The new and as yet far from adequately appreciated factor in the problem of style is no other than the Principle of Evolution applied to art. It means the recognition of the heredity and transformation of artistic forms; and this evolutionary conception implies a method which deals with the types and elements embodied in every work of art as the biological anatomist deals with the organs and tissues of the body, and the embryologist with their pre-natal development. This is the greatest achievement of recent archeology, this is its contribution to the question of how any work of art has come to be what it is, and indeed how art has come to be at all; although the complete answer will be obtained only with the co-operation of another half-fledged but far different study: the experimental psychologic study of the variations of individual psychic types and their connection with variations in bodily functions.

It is the data of artistic evolution which have been and

are still being worked at by the spade and pickaxe of the great excavators, like Schliemann, Evans, Petrie and Morgan, laying bare the foundations and the treasures of unsuspected Minoan Greece and Crete, of pre-dynastic Egypt and undated Susa, nay perhaps by those who have taught us to know the palaeo-lithic carvings of the Dordogne and the cave-frescoes of Altamira, as many delighted readers may have learned second-hand from Mr. G. H. Spearing's *Childhood of Art*. And, similarly, it is at such problems of artistic evolution that have worked and are working, with the more delicate implements of eye and mind, those who like Semper and Riegl and Pottier, like Paulsen, von Sybel and Strykowski, like Wickoff and Löwy, have classified with microscopic accuracy the patterns on ornaments and potsherds, the mouldings of cornices and capitals, the structure of vaultings and ground-plan of edifices, let alone the modes of representing the human figure and of presenting the episodes of a story. The proximate object of their researches may indeed be whether architectural ornament is derived from weaving or wattling or embroidery; whether geometrical pattern precedes, or derives, from representations of plants and animals; whether Hellenic art originated in Crete or was influenced by Egypt and Phoenicia; or whether the Byzantine style should be thought of as a mere aftergrowth of Late-Roman, or a hybridization with Eastern elements. Indeed many, and perhaps the most scientifically valuable, of these investigation have doubtless been seeking for mere facts without attempting any far-reaching theories. Be this as it may, these embryologists and biologists of art have nevertheless all been working, consciously or unconsciously, at a great future science of artistic heredity, habit, adaptation; in short, evolution.

The bare possibility of such a science seems at present scarcely recognized. Yet meanwhile the method of those thus half-consciously contributing to its foundation have already modified the old theory already propounded by Taine, according to which the characteristics of an artistic style are due to its Historical Environment; and have already furnished that theory what it hitherto utterly lacked, namely, some sort of intelligible *why* and *wherefore*. They have insofar added what will prove, after due psychological revision, an important item in any hypothesis as to how a work of art has come to be just what it is.

Of this we have an excellent example in two recent works by two of the most gifted and most modern of our archeological writers, namely, Mrs. Arthur Strong's lectures on *Apotheosis and After Life* and Professor Alessandro della Seta's *Religion and Art*. Both undertake to explain the characteristics of certain styles of art addressing itself to the eye by the influence of religious beliefs with which they chronologically *coincide*. I have emphasized that word *coincide* because it will remind the reader of my contention that archeology has incidentally demonstrated that art has a life of its own, a quasi-biological heredity and evolution, between various stages of which and the stages in development of religious beliefs and social institutions we may expect to find a chronological coincidence and an interaction, but which forbids our accepting such coincident surroundings as the sole or chief explanation of the artistic characteristics constituting what is called a historical or local style. And I have emphasized this fact of *coincidence* also because both the archeologists I am dealing with, and especially Mrs. Arthur Strong, seem disposed to forget this independent life of an art and to consider the various historical styles as the result, indeed as the *expression*, of the religious habits existing in the same times and countries. Thus, considered superficially, both Mrs. Arthur Strong and her immediate predecessor, della Seta, would seem to be returning to the old naïve notions which Taine had popularized so brilliantly sixty years ago. But here comes in an all-important difference: Taine (and how much more Taine's more slovenly disciples, for instance, March Phillips!) had really proceeded by the same unscientific methods and in the same vicious circle, as the "critics" he had ousted and who had explained the main characteristics of the works of, say, Michelangelo and Beethoven, by the characteristics of Michelangelo's and Beethoven's private life and character. For Taine had started from the assumption that whatever emotional or imaginative impression is received from a work of art by the modern beholder, must necessarily answer to the emotional or imaginative intuition of the original artist, and to the effect produced on that artist's contemporaries; forgetting that the art of children and of primitives is apt to impress us as deliberately funny; and also, that we interpret as sad, cheerful, threatening, kindly, etc., a number of natural phenomena,

like sunset and sunshine, winds and rains, which science has shown to be purely material and soulless. Hence the old theory of the Historical Environment (Taine's "*Milieu*") was little more than the explanation of *our* interpretation of visible artistic shapes by characteristics which ourselves had selected among those of past civilizations, characteristics oftenest noticeable because in opposition to our own; and what was worse, largely deduced from the very works of art which they were supposed to explain: the "serenity," the "cheerfulness" of Hellenic life being mainly deduced from the "serenity" and "cheerfulness" we thought we recognized in Hellenic poetry and sculpture; and the "mystical passion" (sometimes described as "hysteria") of the Middle Ages deduced from the "mystical passionateness" which these critics had read into Dante and French cathedrals; nay the alleged impassiveness and stupidity of ancient Egypt from the impassiveness and stupidity for which shallow critics mistook the inevitably primitive character of Egyptian sculpture and architecture. Such naïve explanations are no longer put forward by first-hand students, least of all students of Mrs. Strong's and Professor della Seta's high standing. And it is instructive to note in their work how Taine's conception of the Historical Environment has been radically modified by the methods of modern archeology. These methods, as already pointed out, consist in the minute analysis, comparison and classification, often in historical series, of the shapes dominant in various styles of art. Accordingly we hear no more about "serenity," "cheerfulness," "mysticalness," "impassiveness," or any other "expressions" of this or that phase of art; nor of the corresponding moral and mental peculiarities of the people among whom it arose. Take, for instance, Mrs. Arthur Strong's fascinating lectures on Apotheosis and Late-Roman Art. Their thesis is not that the "character" or "expression" of late-Roman sculpture results from the "character" or "spirit" of late-Roman civilization, one vague something vaguely accounting for another vague something. It is that a definite kind of artistic composition is genetically explicable by the requirements of definite religious beliefs and practices. The artistic composition is that exhibited in the monuments of the later Roman Empire, or rather in the more and more orientalized Empire which Rome had taken over



from the Hellenistic-Oriental successors of Alexander. And the religious requirements are those of the worship of the Roman Emperor or of the Roman Empire deified in his person; a monarchical apotheosis itself taken over, as has been shown by many, and especially by Cumont and Alan Gardiner, from Egypt and the immemorial East, where (Dr. Frazer has made us familiar with the fact) the King long continued to be the Priest and the Priest to be the God. This state-religion of apotheosis, and indeed much of the ritual and theory concerned with after life, had been pushed into the shade in the democratic and rationalistic civilization of classical Hellas. The art of Hellenic Greece had indeed been predominantly religious, but in the sense either of votive offering or of epic commemoration:<sup>1</sup> whence its sharply defined division into an art of free standing statuary (*e.g.*, the Olympian Victors) and of serially-grouped fresco, vase painting and relief, both categories treated with an increasing concentration of merely human interest, and an utter indifference to scenery, indeed spatial whereabouts, by no means apparent in Greek poetry. Such being the case, and despite the acceptance of the anatomical types and athletic poses elaborated in Hellas, the schemes of artistic composition furnished by Hellenic art were unable to meet the requirements of the Oriental-Roman cult of the deified Emperor. This religion of apotheosis had no use for an isolated votive statue serving as a mere consecrated reminder of the worshiper's existence and wants, like the models of limbs or of ships hung up in some Catholic churches, and therefore representing not this person or that, but just a typical "youth" or "maiden" or "warrior" or "winner in the games." What had now to be shown was not the human being to the godhead, but the godhead to the human being. And that godhead was the reigning or just deceased Emperor; moreover, *that particular Emperor*, divinised indeed, but not to be confused with his often hostile predecessors and often rival successors: a God, but also an individual man: Trajan, Marcus Aurelius or Caracalla.

But this was by no means all. The emperor, who had received or would receive divine honors, was not to be looked

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<sup>1</sup> Professor della Seta, while pointing out this commemorative or epic character as a chief determinant of classic Greek sculpture, seems to leave out its *votive* side. Its importance has been brought home to me by Mr. Rouse's volume on *Greek Votive Offerings*.

at, or overlooked, by a busy crowd, as happened with the Greek votive statue on its isolated pedestal at Olympia or Delphi; he was to be worshiped; and worshiped, invoked, glorified not only in public but in private, as the mythical and mystically potent symbol of Rome's immortality. Hence, like every idol, he must be turned full-face to the beholder; there must be no walking round and examining him, as the votive statue is examined. And the better to separate him from the mortal world and show that his real presence is elsewhere than among men's business and pleasures, he must be placed in a tabernacle, a chapel, or in what is the artistic shorthand for such a shrine, in a *frame*. If I take Mrs. Arthur Strong correctly, it is this invention of the framed full-face image which chiefly distinguishes Oriental-Roman art; and which is the chief result of the Oriental-Roman religion of Imperial Apotheosis. For this enshrining frame meant a far closer interplay of architecture and sculpture than was known in Hellenic art. You remember Ruskin calling the Greek temple-gable a *box with figures stuck in it*; to which he might have added that Greek frieze-reliefs were merely so many yards of figure-tapestry tacked onto a wall. And this new relation led to the eventual fusion of architecture and sculpture as we see it in a Gothic façade; and also to the painted, the perspectival, interplay of figures and buildings in Renaissance frescoes like the Sistine ceiling and Raphael's *School of Athens*. Neither was this all: the use of framework introduced a perception of the artistic effects (unknown to all earlier art) of alternated light and shade, no longer variable as when outside illumination falls on a Greek cornice or capital, but prearranged and fixed once for all by such scooping and undercutting as made the pattern consist no longer in surface lines but in masses of light and shade. Add to this that in order to keep the Imperial Godhead's sacramental preponderance and aloofness, all subsidiary figures had to be grouped about it laterally and in profile, thus leading to the composition of medieval altarpieces, and eventually to the co-ordinated perspective which made Renaissance "histories" into something like "tableaux" on a stage.

Thus, according to Mrs. Arthur Strong's thesis, rather implicit than formulated in so many words, artistic style, meaning thereby the prevalent artistic patterns and compositions, would be determined by the demands of the religious

beliefs and institutions with which they chronologically coincide. Mrs. Arthur Strong claims more, or leads us to think that she claims more: namely that the works of art chronologically coinciding with that Oriental-Roman religion of Imperial Apotheosis are the *expression* thereof, much as old fashioned "art criticism" had supposed the works of Michelangelo or Beethoven to be the expression of Michelangelo's or Beethoven's personal life and character. Now if my reader will call to mind what I have just told him about the chief result of recent archeology being the recognition of the principle of growth, heredity and evolution in artistic forms, he will recognize that Mrs. Arthur Strong's claim is an example of the natural but misleading tendency to explain a complex phenomenon by a single one of its causes; or, in the effort of emphasizing one of the factors in a problem, to allow its other factors to drop out of account. Since no one is better aware than Mrs. Arthur Strong, the disciple and popularizer of Furtwängler and Wickhoff, that the whole trend of later Greek art had been towards such a transformation of artistic composition, towards such a gradual reversal of the original standards and aims of art as she has so brilliantly demonstrated in the monuments coinciding with Imperial Apotheosis. The fusion between the free standing statuary of Hellenic art and its serial and merely surface figure-arrangements on slabs and pottery, this fusion had already begun in the high relief of sarcophagi like the later Sidonian ones. And the fusion of the various orders of architecture and consequent application to relief of patterns originally in the round, had brought with it the use of light and shade, let alone the co-ordination of originally incongruous details by inserting boundary and framing patterns such as were familiar in embroidery and metal and enamel work. The artistic schemes of classical Hellas had served their day; they were inevitably broken up into their elements re-arranged and probably hybridized once more (since all points to a historical series of such fertilizing contacts in pre-historic and archaic times) with artistic elements traditional in the nearer Orient. The demands, or in plain English, the *orders* with which the religion of Imperial Apotheosis came forward, naturally influenced, both by the artistically invaluable influence of new suggestion and by the cruder power of economic pressure, the art which it found in this particular

phase of its life-history. Analogous outside influences have been brought to bear on art at all stages of its evolution; but according to the stage of evolution in which such religious demands and suggestions happened to find an art, the visible result has of course been different. No archeologist would deliberately maintain that the religion of Imperial Apotheosis could have left the same kind of monuments if it had met, not the art of say A. D. 100, but the art of B. C. 500 or B. C. 1500. Still less that the Christian religion, succeeding, as Mrs. Arthur Strong has shown so brilliantly, to the mundane pomps of Rome and Alexandria and Antioch, could have resulted in Byzantine churches and Gothic cathedrals, unless its selective action had fallen upon an art having reached just that particular phase, and no other, of its internal development.

This internal development of an art, which all recent archeology and even connoisseurship (poor thing though it still is!) have led us to recognize, and of which I have spoken in biological metaphors, is in reality of purely psychological nature. What plays the part of *heredity* in art is *tradition*; art's growth is due to *imitation* and *invention*; and the current of art's life is the relation between pupil and master; also between the craftsmen of each generation and the public whom their immediate predecessors have accustomed to appreciate and expect certain artistic effects and not others. And the variation in this very real though wholly spiritual life of every art, is due to the psychological necessities of human nature: the necessity for refreshing attentiveness by alterations in aim and means; the impossibility of seeing and feeling twice over alike; the new generation's imperative need to approve itself equal to the old one; the measureless powers of curiosity, of boredom, of wilfulness, of self expression; also of accidental suggestion; and last but not least, of genius perpetually conflicting with the safety and warmth of familiarity: in fact all the psychological necessities of life, which can reproduce itself only after having been produced and nurtured by other life. I have thus spoken of art in biological terms. It must be remembered, nevertheless, that whatever the limitations of bodily heredity, the heredity of spiritual entities like art consists precisely in the storage and transmission of *acquired* variations; and that the action of selection, in this case *social selection*, bears precisely upon

such perpetually recurring and perpetually transmitted potentialities of change. This *social selection* is carried on by the historical environment; which, in the case of art, means the aggregate of all the other spiritual entities, religion, law, manners, philosophy, science true or false, each subject (like art) to its own processes of heredity and variation, each acting on, and being acted on by, the other; and all united by that economic pressure which means that ideas and habits, styles and schools, even like concrete individuals, receive permission to live and reproduce only by accomplishing the tasks to which they are set.

Of all these branches of human activities, Religion, including therein magical ritual, is the oldest, the one which has contained most of the others in their earlier phases. Accordingly Religion has been till recent times the chief employer and paymaster of Art. Alongside of Mrs. Strong's lectures on *Apotheosis*, it is interesting to study Professor della Seta's *Religion and Art*. For instead of showing the influence of a particular group of religious beliefs, like that divinizing of the Roman Emperor which, according to Mrs. Strong, prepared the way for official Christianity, Professor della Seta has reviewed the whole field of visual art, from that of the Old Stone Age to that of medieval Catholicism, showing what were the orders given by Religion and in what manner they were carried out by Art. Like Mrs. Strong, Professor della Seta must be fully aware that the art he thus displays adapting itself under the selection of its religious taskmasters, owed the potentialities, among which this selection was carried on, to life-habits and necessities of its own, to its own psychological laws of heredity and variation. For Professor della Seta preceded the present very interesting and amusing book by a perhaps more scientifically valuable but also far less engaging study of the Genesis and Evolution of Foreshortening in Antique Art. But neither author has deemed it necessary to emphasize the fact that unless Art had its own growth, heredity and evolution, religious beliefs, however much armed with the life-and-death power of setting the artist his task, would never have elicited the particular response constituting the characteristics of various historical and national styles of Art.

It needs some equally learned and penetrating, some perhaps more synthetically thinking, future archeologist to

tell us not the share of religion, and of the rest of the Historical Environment, in selecting among Art's native possibilities and influencing its course; but the share of Art in determining, though in less obvious manner, the character and the attitude of that Religion and the rest of that Historical Environment. Of course the institutions, manners and beliefs summed up as Archaic Hellas or Periklean Athens conduced to make the Greek Epic, the Greek Drama and Greek Painting and Sculpture just what they became. But let us not forget that it was the Greek Epic and Drama, that it was Greek Painting and Sculpture, which elaborated the poetical and plastic shapes wherein immortals and mortals, life and death, came to exist for the Greek mind. And similarly, that if Dante and Giotto cannot be accounted for without the beliefs and institutions (Franciscanism and Scholasticism, Guelph and Ghibelline politics) of medieval Italy, the medieval Italian soul was in its turn shaped by their poetry and painting.

And here, after leaving it so far behind, we seem to be returning to the earliest and naïvest answer to the question "Why has a work of Art come to be just what it is?" namely that there is a special creative power in the Artist. In the artist, most certainly, if we understand thereby all the successive generations of artists. And then—but then only—in each special case, the individual endowment of each artist, in its turn selecting, rejecting, adapting, transforming, the traditions which he has received from his predecessors and the tasks he has accepted from his paymasters.

But that is another question; and one upon which archeology, dealing mainly with anonymous or undocumented works, and therefore rather with schools than with masters, does not promise much help. We have arrived in presence of the great, the mysterious question of the individual artistic endowment and its relation to the general temperament and life of the individual artist. This is a question for the psychology of *individual variations*, that, so to speak, new-born study, working, as it must work sooner or later, in concert with a more scientific development of "connoisseurship," that nowadays still rule-of-thumb comparison between the works of a master and his pupils.

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